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ABSTRACT

Race-relations training is primarily an interpersonal process based on developing understanding between two or more individuals from different cultural backgrounds. The use of a question and answer format in race-relations training can encourage better cross-race understanding and interaction. Race-relations trainers need to develop the capacity to ask provocative and functional questions in the process of training and to develop an ability to assist training participants in internalizing these skills for future cross-race contacts. (Author/PRA)

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Race-Relations Training as the Asking of Questions

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by

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Race Relations Training as the Asking of Questions

Abstract

In a work published in 1991, Foeman argues that race-relations training is primarily an interpersonal process based on developing understanding between two or more individuals from different cultural backgrounds. The author argues that the use of a question and answer format in race-relations training can encourage better cross-race understanding and interaction. The purpose of this work is to assist race-relations trainers in developing the capacity to ask provocative and functional questions in the process of training and to develop an ability to assist training participants in internalizing these skills for future cross-race contacts.

key terms: race-relations, training, dialogue, cross-cultural

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Race-Relations Training as the Asking of Questions

In a work published in 1991 (Foeman, 1991), the author argues "At its core, race-relations training is an interpersonal process, albeit sociopolitical factors influence the interpersonal relationships" (in press). In this work, I wish to further this argument and target the asking of questions as a helpful race-relations training tool for developing skills in unfamiliar cross-race contacts as well as for acknowledging existing sociopolitical realities that may influence these relationships. Of course, the approach of asking questions is neither novel nor unfamiliar: The Socratic dialogue is built on the question and answer form (see Sesonske and Fleming, 1968 for discussion), Sonja Foss (1989) has examined the question as the key to rhetorical analysis; in addition, the pivotal function of the question in therapeutic settings is well documented (Garrett, 1972; Kaufman, 1984; Walters 1988, etc.). In fact, it is the familiarity and success of this approach that make it particularly attractive in the sometimes volatile arena of race-relations training. The question and answer (Q & A) format used in the context of race-relations training has broader applications, however, in that the interchange between communicators is no longer seen as a coaxing by a teacher of a student or a therapist of a client but is rather an interplay between equally engaged and mutually invested interactants. Thus, in addition to providing a functional and familiar approach

to cross-race interchange, Q & A reinforces the notion that race-relations training falls clearly within the purview of the communication scholar.

The purpose of this work is to assist race-relations trainers in developing the capacity to ask provocative and functional questions in the process of training and to develop an ability to assist training participants in internalizing these skills for future cross-race contacts. The information included here, while presented specifically to race-relations trainers has direct application to related issues including ableism, aging, sexual orientation, etc. The goal is to offer trainers an alternative to the point-counterpoint, debate model so pervasive in cross-cultural social intercourse today.

In examining Q & A, let us first consider the benefits of such an approach, how this approach can be woven into the structure of training sessions, how the trainer can begin to develop a system for generating good questions and, finally, the limitations of such an approach.

Benefits

At least two benefits arise from the use of Q & A. One is an interpersonal gain that comes about as interactants learn to build new types of relationships. The second is learning a means

of understanding the sociopolitical orientations of different communicators.

-Interpersonal benefits.

The two most typically used approaches to race-relations training are lecture and discussion formats (see Foeman, 1991, for complete discussion of the issues related to these two training designs). While lecture offers one an opportunity to present ideas in a cogent and complete manner and discussion allows one to maintain balanced input from participants, both are limited in that they may not encourage each person to check the input of the other and to openly seek coorientation. A central feature in creating common understanding is an ability to "interlock" our behaviors; in this case communication (see Wieck, 1976 for examination of the development of common culture). By its nature, Q & A joins dialogue and by its form almost demands that communicators constantly make adjustment to one another. In this, they build a sharedness that encourages the participation of all involved: Questioners are fully engaged in that they are constantly designing questions that highlight the various aspects of the respondent's statements; respondents are engaged in examining their own viewpoints and reevaluating their arguments' merits in relation to the questioner. When approached with skill and good-will, both interactants reach deeper understanding and a greater feeling of community.

Too often in the area of race-relations, assumptions of difference and inherent conflict of interest override willingness to question, listen and share respect for a common humanity. Q & A can address these difficulties directly.

-Sociopolitical benefits.

Beyond the many personal benefits of Q & A is the opportunity to train participants to use this form as a research strategy to gain useful information about other racial groups.

According to Foss (1989), questions assist questioners in "becom[ing] discriminating consumers of symbols, ready to question and investigate the rhetorical phenomena around them" (p. 192). From this point-of-view the question allows questioners to view human behavior as symbolic and decipherable. The use of the question places the asker in the role of investigator and equips her or him with a heuristic approach to probing, drawing conclusions, questioning conclusions and continually building on an expanding information base with the goal of reaching workable and flexible understandings of other groups and individuals.

Q and A allows for an organic process to emerge in which both questioner and answerer set a fluid agenda for learning about one another and, hopefully, for bringing new information (experiences with other individuals, issues in the news, academic information,

etc.) into the learning exchange as well.

Structuring of Race Relations Training

Despite the fact that more and more Americans live in a multiracial environment (Henry, 1990), most do not have the opportunity to systematically examine the multicultural experience of which they are a part. In fact, studies have found that many people feel uncomfortable discussing race-related issues at all (Alderfer, Alderfer, Tucker & Tucker, 1980; Foeman & Pressley, 1987). Given limited experience with asking systematic questions of one another regarding race, developing an inquisitive approach to race-relations can be challenging. Question askers must learn not to offend the sensibilities of others as well as learn to ask questions that enhance understanding of other racial groups. They must also learn to see <u>themselves</u> as research subjects and a small part of a larger multiracial society.

An organized approach needs to be undertaken in moving toward these developments. Let us consider here a) the role of the facilitator, b) rules that apply to using a Q & A approach, c) sample activities and their role and d) types of questions generally used in Q & A.

-The role of the facilitator.

In order to educate participants to Q & A, facilitators must become comfortable and familiar with it. First, facilitators must face fears or reticence about what they may be asked. If facilitators feel self-protective they will no-doubt communicate a closed and defensive feeling to participants. This undermines the Q & A approach. For some facilitators, anxieties are related to personal questions group members might ask them in regard to race issues. One facilitator expressed to me that he feared being asked to talk about cross-race relationships that he felt uncomfortable with. Others are concerned that they will be asked factual information that they do not know. But some facilitator fears are more broad-based. Groups often attack facilitators on levels ranging from facilitators' training competence to their physical appearance. In one group in which I participated, a member attacked an obese facilitator saying, "How can you tell us to have self-control when you obviously have none!" Group training, especially race-relations training, is not for the faint of heart, and certainly not for those who wish to hide their personal limitations from others.

On the very positive side, the open and unpredictable nature of questions allows facilitators to model functional behavior in a field that is often unpredictable, even dangerous. My first word to facilitators is to ask yourself what question you most fear

being asked, then determine how you could honestly and appropriately answer it. If a facilitator is able to face directly her or his worst fear, the model she or he can provide for group participants may be invaluable. The facilitator should also remember that a question generally says more about the asker than the asked, and the ability to articulate this in a nonthreatening way can speak volumes to a defensive and anxious group. The ability to let questions flow over one and hear them as real and sincere inquiries rather than personal attacks is a skill that will do communicators well in many contexts. In the case mentioned above, the facilitator might well have responded, "I can see that my plea for self-control might seem inconsistent to you. Let's talk about the difficulties in maintaining self-control under stress as it relates to cross-race experiences."

More than preparing snappy come-backs, facilitators should become comfortable with periods of silence. Not every question has an immediate answer. Facilitators should reinforce the behavior of thinking before responding.

-Rules.

One helpful way to corral Q & A is to set rules that apply to all questions asked. These protect those questioned and help the facilitator keep control over the relatively open group process. The rules are as follows: a) no one has to answer any question, b) a question can be turned back to the asker, c) the recipient

of a question can ask the nature or goal of a question being asked, d) others cannot answer a question for the person to whom the question is directed, e) the respondent must be allowed to give a complete, uninterrupted answer and f) if a person concedes a point, others cannot take advantage of her or his vulnerability.

-Sample activities.

Q & A can and should be built into the overall structure of training sessions. Yet, in order to further the Q & A approach several activities may be helpful:

Q & A Sessions. Toward the middle of training, participants may be given an opportunity to ask any questions of the facilitator or one another that they have not had an opportunity to ask. The above mentioned rules apply. This activity is often helpful in giving facilitators a measure of what has been important to the group and what issues still need to be addressed. Most groups readily identify questions. Facilitators can develop start-up questions if they feel uncomfortable with this wait-and-see approach.

Hot Seat. This is a relatively intense activity and should only be used in groups where the level of trust is quite high and where all members show interest in participating. Further, this is best conducted in groups that have a long-term and wide-

ranging commitment to the group as a unit. In this activity, each participants takes a turn in the "hot seat" and others in the group ask questions related to how the person sees the group, her or himself and issues of race (for example, "What do you think you have added to this group's process?"). The goal here, is to give participants an opportunity to closely examine their views and roles in the group and community.

Valuable Object Activity. In this activity group members place small personal objects into a bag to represent their ethnic identities. Others first attempt to identify who placed which objects in the bag. They then question the owner to determine why the object represents her or him. This relatively low-intensity activity highlights individual member's racial roles and gives more tentative groups concrete objects from which to work.

Other listening activities and games such as variations on "What's My Line" can also be used for these purposes. Throughout Q & A activities, keep in mind that the goal is to incorporate sharing of feelings and ideas in the race-relations training process. While activities should be fun and/or interesting the overall point (developing an improved style of interacting) should not be lost in the "game" strategy.

-Range of questions.

When presented with the opportunity to Q & A, participants generally ask questions in one of two categories: a) how should I view you? b) how do you view me? The pitfall of the first area of questioning is that the asker may appear to be attacking or judging. The pitfall of the second is that the asker becomes vulnerable to the judgments of the answerer. Simply making interactants aware of these inherent vulnerabilities can take the edge off of many questions that come up.

Developing a Q & A Approach

In developing a useful inquiring approach, a facilitator may want to begin with some of the following: brainstorm the kinds of questions she or he has wanted to ask individuals of other races as well as interesting questions she or he has heard. Obvious or "simple" questions should not be eliminated. A question such as "Can you tell me a time when you have felt left out?" can be very provocative when well placed. The facilitator should ask same-race colleagues and friends what they would like to know about individuals of other races. Ask colleagues of other races to gather questions from their same-race colleagues and friends. Begin practice by finding a colleague of another race who is interested in sharing in this learning process. Share relevant reading materials as well as experiences and ask one another related questions. Work on developing sensitivity to each

other's nonverbal as well as verbal responses.

The facilitator should make a habit of summarizing personal learning about individuals and groups. Making one's own beliefs and assumptions explicit will help one to investigate them and to constantly support or refute them. As facilitators begin to train others to ask effective questions they should share with them some of the benefits and pitfalls they have experienced in learning the process.

Difficulties Associated with this Approach.

Despite its many benefits, Q & A as an approach to race-relations training has some complications as well. First, the asker must be careful not to barrage others with personal questions and thus place them in a defensive posture. All communication occurs in a context, and establishing a context for cross-race dialogue is essential. It is highly inappropriate to approach a person with whom one has had little past contact and ask a broad question such as, "What's it like to be Black at this university?" One must establish a relationship appropriate to the level of questioning sought. Race-relations training will hopefully make participants sensitive to this.

Second, individuals may learn to use a question as a tool so that while they delve into the psyche of others they remain protected.

Asking another person a question gives the asker great responsibility for that person's well-being. This responsibility needs to be communicated within race-relations training as well as the real option for a respondent to say, "no." Remind participants that it is always helpful to precede a verbalized question with one to oneself: "How would I feel if this person asked me the identical question?"

Third, I have often been asked, "Are there questions that should not be asked.." My natural response is no. Yet, if a facilitator asks her or himself, "Is this question sincerely asked?" and "Will a response to this question help us to better understand one another?" and the answer to both is no, then the facilitator may well want to pass on having a group address it. I also tend not to like anonymously presented questions. I view questions has a part of a community building process. Since one cannot effectively build community with anonymous others, I tend to avoid this questioning approach.

Forth, facilitators may wonder at what point to end discussion of any one question. If a question begins to lose energy in the group, I often ask interested participants to continue dialogue in private. I also end questioning if interactants reach deadlock.

Finally, facilitators should to be aware that questions need to

lead to some healing or understanding. Facilitators should encourage interactants who cannot come to agreement to at least acknowledge the views of the other. A variety of activities can be used to close dialogue in a supportive way (see Foeman, 1991).

Conclusion

The use of Q & A can be an important aspect of race-relations training; one that at once acknowledges respect for others' individually and group history, position and identity. Q & A is a place to begin a process of opening that reflects the fluid communication environments in which we live. It is my hope that more facilitators will view Q & A as a cornerstone in the race-relations training process.

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